

The Cross and Christian Leadership

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from 1 Corinthians chapter 4.

It's on page 1146 in the Church Bibles. Corinthians chapter 4. And reading from verse 1.

This, then, is how you ought to regard us, as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.

[1 : 21] At that time, each will receive their praise from God. Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, Do not go beyond what is written.

Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?

And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich.

You have begun to reign, and that without us. How I wish that you really had begun to reign, so that we also might reign with you. For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena.

We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ.

[2 : 33] We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored. We are dishonored. To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty. We are in rags.

We are brutally treated. We are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it.

When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment. I am writing this not to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.

Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus, I became your father through the gospel.

Therefore, I urge you to imitate me. For this reason, I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

[3 : 43] Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing. And then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Graeme, for reading. If you can keep your Bibles open, 1 Corinthians chapter 4, that will be a big help.

It's page 1146 in the church Bibles. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet, if you find that helpful. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the gift of your Holy Spirit. And we ask, Holy Spirit, will you be with us now? And open our ears to hear your voice.

[4 : 44] Give us heads that can understand, and hearts that are open to your revelation. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. A few years ago, I was invited by a friend who had a spare ticket to a football match, and it was corporate hospitality.

It was at the famous Riverside Stadium in Middlesbrough. It doesn't matter where it was. It was an executive box run by a plastering company. So I guess there were lots of people there who they had worked with in the construction industry.

And then at some point in the day, I think at half time, the question came round to me, so what do you do? And I've heard some ministers have some quite clever ripostes to that question.

If you know of any, do let me know. I've heard people say things like, well, I prepare people to meet their maker, and things like that. But I've never managed to pull any of those things off.

So I just say, I'm a church minister. And you usually get this stunned silence. And then people often say the same kinds of things when you say you're a minister.

[5 : 51] They say things like, oh, right, you don't look like a vicar. And I don't know what they mean, but I always feel pleased that they've said that.

There's just something about looking like a vicar that I don't want. And so, and I don't think they mean, yeah, so there's something about it being good not to look like a vicar, I think.

And sometimes they say, oh, right, so have you always been a vicar? You know, as if it's kind of something you're born into. And I think it's because they're hoping, understandably, that you might have had a proper job at some point that might mean you could talk about that instead.

Because they're not sure what to say. So what do ministers really do? What are they for? What does a good one look like? It's a good question if you belong here at St. Silas.

Because at some stage you might move on to a new place and be looking for, wondering what are the right things to look for in a Christian leader in a church. Or you might be here when I move on and you're thinking, well, what do we want from the next leader of our church?

[6 : 58] Or what do we want from the leadership as we recruit new staff in the church? Some of you are in some kind of Christian leadership yourself in the church. And by extension you can be thinking, well, I have a role in some kind of Christian leadership.

Leading a small group or involved in a certain ministry in this church or in a different organization. Maybe some of you are thinking about whether the Lord would be calling you to explore full-time Christian work, gospel work.

Well, the church in Corinth that this letter 1 Corinthians is written to, they've got themselves in a tangle about Christian leadership. They're confused. They've become Christians in a city that was enchanted by wisdom, the wisdom of the age.

So they brought that into church life. And they're looking for leaders that can give them the best worldly wisdom on offer. And they were infatuated by influence and power.

So they wanted leaders who displayed that and could flex their influence muscles. And they were deeply concerned, you can see from the letter, with the idea of getting the best out of life now.

[8 : 04] Living your best life now. And so they wanted leaders who could help them with that. And they're stumbling over Paul, this apostle who writes the letter, who was the first Christian leader they met.

They'd heard about Jesus from him. But his style was unimpressive. He reminded them in chapter 2, verse 1, that he didn't come to them with eloquence or human wisdom.

He said in verse 3 that he came with great fear and trembling. So he was unimpressive as a speaker. And his message was unimpressive. In chapter 2, verse 2, he said, I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And the other problem with Paul is that since he came to Corinth, they've realized he's always in trouble, Paul. He's always getting himself in trouble. He's in and out of prison.

He goes to some towns and he gets flogged. He gets arrested. There's riots. He's been stoned. He's a bit of an embarrassment. So the Corinthians, they think of Paul a bit like a 15-year-old thinks of Blue Peter.

[9 : 12] You know, the kind of, you don't mind that Blue Peter is there. It's just for younger people. And you've grown on to something else now. They've grown out of Paul and his ministry.

His message to them was the way into the Christian life. But for them, it's not the way on in the Christian life. And so Paul has been writing to them about Christian ministry since chapter 1, verse 10.

And here, in this chapter, he gives this great bit of teaching about what Christian leadership should really look like. And our first point is this. Christian leaders are servants who preach the cross. They're servants who preach the cross. Have a look with me at verse 1, again, of chapter 4. He says, He gave us two pictures of this last week in chapter 3.

For those who are with us, remember the houseplants. Someone gives you a houseplant. Someone has planted it. You might water it. But realistically, you're not the one making it grow.

[10:20] It's God who makes plants grow. It's God who gives life. And so it is with the spiritual life of a church. People are busy at work. Only God gives the growth. His second picture last week in chapter 3 was of the church as a building.

Not any building. The church, the people, are the temple of the living God. The Spirit of God dwells in us. And so God looks at his servant leaders, the leaders of his church, as like builders. And he calls them to take care how they build. That they would build with materials that last. That by bringing the word of God, dependent on the Spirit of God, to show people the message of the cross. Disciples will be grown. Disciples who endure and last. And here the picture is of the church leader as a household servant in chapter 4, verse 1.

A good picture of that might be, you know when you go to a wedding. And when you arrive at the reception, presumably you know the couple well. You're not a wedding crasher. You're going to a wedding of a couple you know well.

[11:23] And they or their family, perhaps, are hosting you for the wedding. And when you walk into the venue, it might be a beautiful venue. And you usually meet a waiter or a waitress on the way in, holding a tray and offering you a drink.

And hopefully you say thank you to them. But you soon forget them. You don't spend the evening marveling at the waiter or the waitress. No, your gratitude is towards the host. And those waiters and waitresses are servants to make the evening work.

And in the same way, we should think of church leaders. Even the Apostle Paul or Apollos, who's mentioned, who'd visited Corinth. They're nothing more than stewards, servants of Christ.

But for the benefit of the church, the second thing we learn about them in verse 1, those servants, is that these leaders have been entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

Now, what does that look like? Well, there are societies that you can join. You might join. I don't suggest you do. But you could join, if you were invited, the Freemasons.

[12:28] And in societies like the Freemasons, there's a lot about hidden mysteries that get revealed. And when you join, there are some things that you find out. But it's really only once you ascend the ranks and get into the inner ring that you really get the secrets revealed to you.

But in the Christian life, wonderfully, it's very different to that. But there was mystery in what the prophets had foretold for generations and centuries.

And even the prophets themselves were yearning to know what quite they were prophesying about. But now that Christ has come and died and risen and ascended, those mysteries are revealed to us through the apostles for whom that revelation was entrusted for us.

So in the Christian life, we're not looking around, wishing that we were in on the mystery that could be revealed to us. Rather, we look for the message of the cross to be revealed by Christian leaders. And we see that that was what Paul did in chapter 1, in chapter 1 verse 18. He said, And then in verse 23 of chapter 1, he said this, The message that reveals the mysteries of God is the message of the cross.

[14:08] And it's not a simplistic message. There's nothing shallow about that message. There is depth to grow in through our lives. But it is a simple message in which the mysteries of God are revealed to us.

And it's so good that God is like this. It means that we don't need to worry that we're missing out if we haven't read a particular Christian book. Or we don't know a particular Christian leader. We can look for Christian leaders who are servants of God and faithfully preach the message of the cross from the scriptures. For in the scriptures, each of us has access to the apostles revealing to us the mysteries of God in Christ.

It's a message that starts with exposing our need. It's a humbling message. And that's one of the things the world finds so foolish about the message of the cross. I don't know if you've been watching the TV drama, The Capture.

It's in season two at the moment, The Capture. It's very gripping. It's very tense. It's about secret agents in the UK. And there's an American guy in The Capture who you can tell is just really dodgy. [15:19] He spent his life in the underworld of the spy networks, breaking all kinds of laws wherever he's been for the CIA. And he finds out he's got cancer. And he goes to see someone to ask for help who's had cancer.

And they say, you need to deal with your guilt. That will help you get through. So he goes to see a rabbi. He's Jewish. He goes to see a rabbi. And he says to the rabbi that he is concerned because he is worried about what God will think of the way he's lived his life.

And the rabbi says this to him. He says, So this is why you've come back to a synagogue after 50 years to atone for your sins?

Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you've come to the wrong place. No amount of prayers can save you from your sins against your fellow human beings.

And no rabbi can offer you forgiveness. Your atonement is in your hands through your good deeds in everyday life. And the guy is crushed.

[16:24] He's crushed by that. And that sense of feeling crushed, of collapsing, overwhelmed by the sense that we need atonement, is key to the message of the cross.

There is something right about that understanding that when we contemplate who we've become and how we've lived in God's world, we are foolish to think that some religious works that we do could bring atonement for that before a holy God.

Where the rabbi is wrong, I think, is he's implying that something could be done now by the man to make up for it. When in truth, if we go out tomorrow and just do as many good deeds as we can, we won't be making up for the bad things we've done.

We'll just be doing our duty tomorrow. That can't put things right for the things we've got wrong. So the message of the cross humbles us by saying we cannot do things right before God.

We can't make things right. But then it says that through the cross, God has made atonement for our sins. And it's not just that God would do 99% of the work and leave us to do the 1% that's left.

[17:41] If he did that, we would still be lost. So God did everything so that he can say to us, come without cost, through the cross, and enjoy right standing with me.

Freedom in Christ. Reconciliation with God. Friendship with him. Certain hope for the future. For at the cross, chapter 1 verse 30, the apostle Paul says, we can boast in the Lord because Christ is our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption.

He is our righteousness so that we can look at the guilt of our past life, of the life we've lived, and we can ask ourselves the question, will God punish the same sins twice?

Christ. Jesus has died a sin-bearing death and paid the penalty for those sins so that we can celebrate his righteousness and come back to God.

That's the message of the cross. And Christian leaders are servants who preach that message. Now the apostle Paul gives two implications of that in chapter 4. The first is, so don't judge them.

[18:47] They're servants of God. Don't judge them. God will judge them. So look at verse 2. He says, now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. So God will judge them for how faithful they have been to the message of the cross that he's entrusted to them through the scriptures.

Then he says, even his own judgment of himself doesn't ultimately matter. Verse 3, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself.

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. And then he says the basis on which God will judge as well as faithfulness.

Look at verse 5. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.

At that time, each will receive their praise from God. So God will judge the Christian leader according to their heart. And yet, even though that should move anyone in Christian leadership to examination and repentance, Paul frames it positively.

[19:56] Knowing that God is merciful and compassionate, he says in verse 5 that each will receive their praise from God. And the big idea he's making here, conveying here, is that leaders are free not to be enslaved to the judgment of other people.

It's not that leaders are unaccountable, of course. Paul would, Paul has been teaching in these chapters so much about what Christian leaders are to be so that we can have leaders who are

accountable.

We know how to, what to look for and what to be praying for them. And at the same time, Paul is saying here that Christian leaders shouldn't be man-pleasers.

They shouldn't adapt all the time what they do according to what the congregation asks of them. There comes a point when they recognize it's God who judges me and God has made clear to me what he calls me to do.

They do their job with an audience of one, the living God. So the next implication that Paul gives is to be humble, not just the leaders but all of us. In verse 6, he urges the Corinthians not to get puffed up about which leaders they've got and which leaders they follow.

[21 : 11] They need a bigger view of the cross and a smaller view of their leaders. And it's incomprehensible to be a Christian and to think of yourself as a big deal, whether it's because of which leader you've got or what other people say of you.

It's just incomprehensible because of the principle of verse 7 if you have a look. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

So that's our first point. It's about the leader's message. Leaders are servants who preach the cross. Our second point is about how they live. Christian leaders are fools who live the cross. So we get this extraordinary contrast in verses 8 to 13 between the Corinthians and the apostles, the Christian leaders. The contrast is between their impression of who they are and Paul's honest admission of what the apostles are.

They've gone off in completely different directions. Corinthians' perception of themselves, apostles and what they are. And that immense difference comes from how we would answer this question in the Christian life.

[22 : 27] It's, do you think you've reached your destination? Having become a Christian, do you think that you've arrived at your destination? So does the gospel message make you a person of hope for the future or is it principally about what you get here and now?

So the Corinthian spirituality is in verse 8 and it's an already spirituality. You have a look at verse 8. He says, already you have all you want. Already you've become rich.

You have begun to reign and that without us. And then the irony, how I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you.

So no wonder they feel uneasy about Paul who keeps getting arrested and imprisoned and flogged. But true spirituality is modeled for us by Jesus who for the glory set before him came in humility to our world to serve and to lay down his life for others.

So Paul gives us a picture of his life following that pattern of the way of the cross in verse 9. He says, for it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession like those condemned to die in the arena.

[23 : 48] When a general won a military battle in the Roman Empire, they would arrive back in Rome and there would be this great street parade for them coming back in. They'd wait outside the city for the parade to get ready.

And then the general would lead the way with his commanding officers at the front celebrating their victory. At the very back of the procession, you'd have those who'd been taken captive, ready to be taken to the Colosseum to die in the arena.

It's a place of humiliation and defeat and shame. And Paul is saying, that's the picture that he models of the Christian life. Where the church looks weak, where the leaders are dishonored by the world, that's not something to be embarrassed about.

That's like God's shop window for the Christian life and the Christian faith. So he goes on in verse 9. We've been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels, as well as to human beings.

So when we want to see what it might look like to be a Christian in these times, living between the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus, the picture is not being in a royal box, it's being put to death in the arena.

[25 : 06] It's not the comfort of a palace, it's the hardship of a prison cell. He sums it up in verse 13. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment.

The garbage. When I lived in a house with friends, I remember one of the jobs we used to talk about that we all hated was when you were on washing up duty and you had to put your hand into the blocked up sink and pull out all the stuff that had clogged the sink up.

That's the picture of the Christian leader viewed through the lens of the world that Paul gives us here. We are the sweepings in the dustpan.

We are the scrapings in the food bin. That's the shop window for the Christian life. It models for us something about being united to Jesus who set aside his crown in love for us and came into our world and let people beat him and put a crown of thorns on his head and mock his royalty and put him to death so that he could bear our shame and when we stand before him we'll have no shame. So for the Christian we see that there is joy in the Christian life on the other side of obedience of humble service of God and others and the Corinthians just haven't got that.

[26 : 40] They think they've arrived today already. They want it all. They want it all. They want it all. They want it now. And Paul shows the contrast from verse 10 between him and them.

Verse 10 We are fools for Christ but you are so wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong. You are honored. We are dishonored. He goes on in verse 11 about hunger and thirst and rags and brutal treatment and homelessness.

Even verse 12 would have been shameful for the Corinthians that he says we work hard with our own hands. So what does maturity in the Christian life look like? What does power look like in the Christian life?

It looks like responding in a godly way a Jesus-like way to hardship to shame. In verse 12 he says when we are cursed we bless.

When we are persecuted we endure it. When we are slandered we answer kindly. Now we shouldn't over-apply this message to think there is no gain now to the Christian life.

[27 : 48] There is an alreadyness to the Christian life. We have already if you're a Christian we have already been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus whom God loves.

We already have every spiritual blessing in Christ. We've been forgiven redeemed adopted. We have the first fruits of a great future in the Holy Spirit in our lives enabling us to call on God as our Father enabling us to live obedient lives.

We have future hope that we're confident of based on past events in Jesus rising again. At the same time we're to remember we're not in glory yet.

All around us in our own lives we see sadness and badness and we see it in our lives in ourselves. So we're bound to find it attractive when we hear that there's a Christian leader with a different message that says we can have triumph now and victory now and power now and wisdom now and maturity now.

But Paul here says Christian leaders are servants who preach the cross they're fools who live the cross. and it's good to remember that when we think about our expectations for our church leaders.

[29 : 03] We're not looking for them to be honoured in the world's eyes. If they're being faithful we might find that they the world holds them in dishonour. Not that we should be going out of our way to be dishonoured and looking for shame.

We don't go out of our way to offend the world but we shouldn't be surprised if the world does dishonour our Christian leaders.

And we shouldn't be surprised if for us to associate with them becomes costly. If people at work know you're a Christian but when they find out the church you go to they say I didn't realise you're one of those Christians.

Leaders who follow Jesus will be fools who live the cross. And the big implication of leaders doing that comes in our third point more briefly.

It's that Christian leaders encourage the way of the cross. So that's in the end of the chapter from verses 14 to 21. Paul shows us that he loves the people in verse 14.

[30 : 07] He says I'm writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. He says that he's like their father and he says that he's going to send Timothy to them who he loves in verse 17.

He says he's going to visit them again in verses 18 to 21 but he warns he'll come with authority. But the central idea to this last section is very simple and it comes in verse 16.

Just have a look at verse 16. He says therefore I urge you to imitate me. Imitate him.

Imitate Paul all of us with the message with the message that we line up our lives behind. That the words we speak about being a Christian and what that means to others are words about Jesus and his rescue mission to the cross.

And imitate Paul with our lives. Thankfully in our city today following Jesus is not likely to mean homelessness and rags and beatings and humiliation.

[31 : 11] Thankfully, what could it mean though for us? It would be helpful to reflect on verse 13 therefore I urge you to imitate me and each of us ask ourselves what is it really costing me to be a Christian?

Does chapter 4 prepare us to accept that it's just not realistic to think you can be a Christian and be the person that all your non-Christian mates think is the biggest legend in their life?

We can't live the authentic Christian life and have the wholehearted approval of our not yet believing mates. It just won't work.

In fact just as the world looked at Paul and the apostles and said what fools what a fool we could expect that if non-Christians around us look at our choices in life that they would say you're being foolish.

That should be a natural reaction to seeing the way that we use our gifts our time our money the decisions we make that non-Christians would not get it and they'd say you're a fool you're being foolish.

[32 : 23] I think of a friend who was a doctor to the great pride of his parents but he trained for church ministry he left medicine and you won't know his name because he went to live on a council estate in South London to lead a very small church there and share Jesus with the people around him.

The world says it's foolish. Where could the world think of your life as foolish because you're a Christian? For some of us it's one step just being prepared to share with some people in your life that you are a Christian.

Are there places where you'd feel particularly ashamed to do that? Maybe on the golf course or in the staff room or at the football match with the guys you go with or at drinks after work on a Friday or among colleagues in the operating theatre?

Or is the foolishness for us about where we simply are called to follow a path of daily obedience to Jesus saying no to our desires for comfort in this life for wealth status sexual gratification could it be about who we spend time with and include people that we find it hard work to spend time with but we do it to serve Christ.

Paul says he's a fool who lives the cross and then he says I urge you to imitate me. Let's pray together. Chapter 1 verse 30 Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God that is our righteousness holiness and redemption therefore as it is written let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

[34 : 11] We praise you and thank you heavenly father that Jesus Christ has taken our shame and made atonement for our sins. We ask that by your spirit you would help our Christian leaders to serve you well in faithfully sharing the message of the cross guard their hearts guard our hearts guard my heart we pray in your mercy and would you help each of us to abound in our confidence in the future resurrection life that you have won for us so that we are willing to suffer shame and dishonor from the world to follow Jesus today knowing that this truly is for our good and for your glory.

Amen. We're going to sing in response to God's word Catherine and the band will lead us.